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THE LOST COMMISSION: A STUDY IN MISSISSIPPI HISTORY ¹

"About this time [1844]," says Claiborne in his history of Mississippi, "an incident occurred that created some excitement in Mississippi. Mr. [Robert J.] Walker being assured of a position in the Cabinet, transmitted his resignation as Senator, by a confidential friend, to Gov. Brown. On its reception the Governor filled out a commission for Hon. J. Thompson, then one of the representatives from Mississippi, and transmitted the same to Walker, to be delivered on his confirmation to a seat in the Cabinet. This commission, for reasons of his own, Walker never delivered. He never communicated the facts to Thompson with whom he was in daily association. It seems that on resigning he had urged the appointment of Gwin, and withheld the commission hoping that his recommendation, deriving additional force from his position in the Cabinet, might be adopted."²

Before undertaking to set forth the circumstances connected with this incident, it will be of interest to survey the political situation as it existed in Mississippi at the close of the Tyler administration. In spite of the "somewhat artificial basis" upon which the popularity of Jackson rested in the south, there existed in Mississippi no such intense hatred for his successor as was entertained for Van Buren in some other southern states, as for instance in South Carolina. So far as the whigs were concerned, some of their organs declared that the democrats had been hunting for an excuse for three years to drop Van Buren;³ consolation was derived from a reputed saying of Mississippi boatmen that "*things* among the Democrats *is* mightily mixed up," and that the followers of Van Buren would never support

¹ This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Mississippi valley historical association in St. Paul, Minnesota, May 9, 1918.

² John F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a province, territory and state, with biographical notices of eminent citizens* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1880), 438.

³ *Constitutionalist*, May 11, 1844; cf. Jesse S. Reeves, *American diplomacy under Tyler and Polk* (Baltimore, 1907), 121.

James K. Polk.⁴ By some whig journals the nomination of Van Buren was deemed unavoidable, and, it is almost needless to add, his defeat certain.⁵ The sentiment of the whig party in Mississippi in 1844 was accurately reflected in the statement, "We go for Henry Clay, Texas or no Texas."⁶ To the whigs of this state the defeat of their great leader was simply inconceivable, regardless of his attitude on the leading question of the day, and irrespective of whoever might be the nominee of the opposing party.⁷

By the democratic journals and party leaders of Mississippi it was confidently believed that Van Buren would receive the nomination of his party. In the early part of 1843 the *Mississippi Free Trader*—the leading democratic organ in the state—predicted the nomination either of Van Buren or of John C. Calhoun.⁸ The latter was uniformly referred to in eulogistic terms by the editors of the state, regardless of party affiliations, but was consistently opposed by the leading politicians.⁹ In the democratic state convention held at Jackson in January, 1844, forty-four counties being represented, Martin Van Buren received sixty-two votes of the delegates present, while Calhoun received only twenty; for vice-president, Polk received fifty-one votes, and R. M. Johnson, twenty-nine. One of the five electors chosen by this same convention was Jefferson Davis, of Warren county, who distinguished himself by his eulogy of Calhoun.¹⁰ By the *Vicksburg Sentinel*, the exponent of the radical wing of the party in the state, the nominee of the Jackson convention

⁴ *Constitutionalist*, May 15, August 14, 1844.

⁵ *Port Gibson Herald*, May 23, 1844.

⁶ *Constitutionalist*, May 15, 1844.

⁷ Sentiments similar to these were expressed by leading whigs of Georgia. See letter of Alexander Stephens in "The correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb," edited by Ulrich B. Phillips, in American historical association, *Annual report*, 1911 (Washington, 1913), 2: 58.

⁸ *Mississippi Free Trader*, January 11, February 1, 1843.

⁹ In an "Address to the people of Mississippi," May, 1835, John F. H. Claiborne said: "I am more of a States Right man than many among you who shout hosannas to Mr. Calhoun." Claiborne correspondence, manuscripts in state archives of Mississippi. In 1842, Robert J. Walker, who is represented as the consistent opponent of Calhoun, spoke of the latter's talents and integrity in the highest terms, and predicted that if he were nominated he would certainly be elected. *Ibid.*, cf. *Columbus Democrat*, February 1, 1845.

¹⁰ *Mississippi Free Trader*, January 17, 1844.

was referred to in terms little short of fulsome; he was, it said, "never so popular as at present."¹¹ Eight years before a leading organ of the democratic party had printed an editorial of which the refrain was:

"Cotton is rising
Van Buren is coming,"

and had predicted that the "people of the state would never abandon Mr. Van Buren until they became blind to the past and reckless to the future."¹² This same journal declared that the administration of Andrew Jackson had done more for southern interests than all preceding administrations combined.¹³ An address of the democratic committee of Mississippi declared that Van Buren was entitled to the heart-felt gratitude of every citizen of Mississippi.

"Fellow citizens," ran the address, "are you prepared to abandon Andrew Jackson, his principles, and measures, to gratify the ambitious aspirations of Hugh L. White? Who is Andrew Jackson, and what are his principles, his services and measures, that you should now unite with the nullifiers, in driving him in disgrace to the Hermitage? He is the same scar-covered patriot, who shed his blood in your defence in the war of the revolution, who toiled for you through fatigue and danger in the wilds of Alabama, who protected your wives and children from the tomahawk and scalping knife of the savage, who saved the great emporium of the west from a foreign enemy, and terminated our second struggle with Great Britain, with glory and renown . . . the very farms you cultivate would now be occupied by the savages, but for the treaties negotiated by him." Despite this impassioned appeal in behalf of the "Old Hero" and the gratitude which was felt toward him for the removal of the Indians, Mississippi in 1836 was only held in the democratic column by a greatly reduced majority over that of four years before.

It may safely be said that but for Van Buren's Texas letter, he would never have been so readily cast aside by the party leaders of Mississippi in 1844. For if there was one thing upon

¹¹ *Vicksburg Sentinel*, February 28, March 29, 1844.

¹² *Mississippian*, October 7, 1836.

¹³ *Ibid.*

which the democracy of Mississippi was of one mind and one purpose, it was the immediate annexation of Texas, and woe betide the candidate who ventured to obstruct or to turn aside the steadfast purpose of those bent upon achieving that object. This purpose had been set forth in no uncertain tone in the messages of governors, the resolutions of the legislature, in countless editorials, and in no end of resolutions passed by democratic meetings and Texas associations. There was one sentiment voiced in all these expressions of opinion: that the annexation of Texas was vital to the security of the institutions of the south; at the same time manifold other blessings were recounted which would redound to the country as a whole as a result of this great measure.

There was nothing surprising in this attitude on the part of Mississippi. Before Texas had achieved its independence, voices were raised in the state in advocacy of annexation. In a speech made at Raymond, a little town not far from Jackson, in the fall of 1835, Robert J. Walker replying to Franklin E. Plummer in the senatorial canvass of that year pronounced himself in favor of acquiring Texas by treaty; for this would give the south and southwest six additional slave states. Thus did the man who, more than any other, brought the Texas question within the domain of practical politics, sound the keynote of the campaign of 1844.¹⁴ The *Woodville Republican*, a whig journal, pronounced in favor of annexation;¹⁵ the *Free Trader* characterized as a palpable falsehood the charge of the *Natchez Courier* that Van Buren was opposed to Texas, and that it was owing to his influence that Jackson had not taken a more decided stand upon the subject.¹⁶ In the summer of 1837 a select com-

¹⁴ *Mississippian*, September 18, 1835. Cf. "Diplomatic correspondence of the republic of Texas," edited by George P. Garrison, in American historical association, *Annual report*, 1908 (Washington, 1909-1911), 1: 317, where it is printed out how the acquisition of Texas would give the south a preponderance in the senate.

¹⁵ *Woodville Republican*, December 10, 1836.

¹⁶ *Mississippi Free Trader*, September 1, 1836. It is hardly correct to say, however, as has been alleged, that the subject of annexation was never lost sight of in the state from 1836 to 1844. So far as the newspapers are concerned, annexation was dropped almost entirely out of sight after the winning of Texas independence until 1843. A file of the weekly *Mississippi Free Trader* extending from July 30, 1839, to July 2, 1840, contains over sixty references to Texas but not one to annexation; in the same journal from August 25, 1842, to the close of that year, there are eighteen items dealing with Texas, one of which bears upon the annexation question;

mittee of the legislature to which had been referred a memorial of sundry citizens of Hinds county relative to the expediency of receiving Texas, resolved that "the annexation of Texas is essential to the future safety and repose of the southern states;" the Mississippi senators and congressmen were requested to further annexation as early as practicable. These resolutions were unanimously adopted by the house.¹⁷ There was another subject closely related to the Texas question, upon which unanimity of opinion also prevailed; this was the slavery question. The members of the house declared that "the South does not possess within her limits a blessing, with which the affections of her people are so closely intertwined and so completely enfibred, and whose value is more highly appreciated."¹⁸

Second only in importance to the acquisition of Texas as a means of increasing the political weight of the south in the councils of the nation was the argument founded on the danger to be apprehended from Great Britain's securing a foothold in that region; the antipathy to that power and suspicion of her nefarious designs to use Texas as a lever for freeing the slaves in the south made many a Mississippi editor boil with rage.

The appearance of Van Buren's letter upon the Texas question called forth varied comments from the party organs within the state. In the opinion of the *Mississippian* his views and arguments should be fairly weighed; it dwelt upon his statement that "the American continent can no longer be considered subject to foreign colonization." The democracy of Mississippi should proceed cautiously in pledging men not to vote for any anti-annexation candidate; the south must beware of deserting its "natural allies," the democracy of the north; the shibboleth of annexation should not take precedence of all other questions, for thus would the hot-headed movements of some result in the electoral vote of the state being given for Clay. This same journal admitted, however, that Van Buren's letter had caused many

a complete file of the weekly edition for 1841 contains sixty allusions to Texas, two of which refers to annexation. A complete file of the *Woodville Republican* for 1840 contains twenty news references to Texas, but not a single allusion to annexation. Cf. Justin H. Smith, *Annexation of Texas* (New York, 1911), 71.

¹⁷ *Niles' Weekly Register*, 52: 258.

¹⁸ Cf. Cleo Hearon, "Mississippi and the compromise of 1850," in Mississippi historical society, *Publications*, 14: 14. See also *Niles' Weekly Register*, 64: 173.

of his friends to hesitate. It was clear that the sole object of Tyler in thrusting the annexation question into politics was to erect a political guillotine for Van Buren, throw the mass of the party into confusion, and thereby secure a rally to himself at the Baltimore convention.¹⁹

By the *Columbus Democrat* the letter of Van Buren was characterized as "a most able and elaborate document." Disapproval was expressed of the tone of some rather extreme resolutions adopted by the Texas annexation association of Holmes county at Franklin on May 18. These asserted that the time had arrived when the people of the south and west had a right to demand annexation, which, so far as the south was concerned, was one with the right of self-preservation; "the opposition of Van Buren and Clay was nothing more than a mere temporising measure of political chicanery to secure the support of northern abolitionists."²⁰ Herein are represented the views of the radical element of the party, of the "chivalry" or left wing as it was dubbed by the more conservative democrats and whigs. Felix Huston, who figured prominently in the Texas revolution, was one of the leaders of this element. The *Jeffersonian* admitted that the letter of the ex-president displayed much ability, but "it fails to convince us that he is right."²¹ The *Mississippi Free Trader* frankly admitted its disappointment at the sentiments expressed by Van Buren with reference to annexation;²² the *Vicksburg Sentinel and Expositor* expressed its admiration for "the delicacy and honesty of the man," but failed to be convinced by his arguments. "We go for Texas *now*—for Texas always." "What thinks the Democracy of the gifted and

¹⁹ The sentiments of the followers of "Johnny Tyler" were thus expressed:

"Van, Van, Van,
Is a used up man —
The war cry
Is Tex and Ty!
You know it,
We go it,
Hip and thigh
For Tex and Ty."

Mississippian, May 15, 22, 29, 1844. Cf. *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 29, 1844.

²⁰ *Columbus Democrat*, May 11, June 8, 1844.

²¹ *Jeffersonian*, May 18, 1844.

²² *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 15, 1844.

patriotic Buchanan?" it asked, and added that if a northern man were to be the nominee of the Baltimore convention then it must be a "northern man with southern principles." It pronounced Walker's famous letter a complete refutation of every argument that had been advanced by Clay and Van Buren against annexation.²³

More significant so far as the fortunes of the rival candidates for the democratic nomination were concerned was the manifesto put forth by the Mississippi delegation issued from Washington in May, 1844. This address to the democratic party of Mississippi was signed by the seven delegates chosen to represent that state at Baltimore; two of these were Robert J. Walker and Jacob Thompson; the former had been in the senate since 1835, and the latter had been a member of the house since 1839. This declaration spoke in no uncertain tone. It dwelt upon the fact that those who composed the convention that selected the delegates to the nominating convention had united in a subsequent meeting in favor of *immediate* annexation; that the legislature later, composed largely of members of the state convention, had declared that subject to be of paramount importance; furthermore the democratic press of the state was unanimous upon the subject, while the same measure was supported by very many whigs. Why any deference should have been accorded the attitude of the whigs as a reason for breaking their instructions was not disclosed. The address then proceeded to declare that no one opposed to this measure would receive the support of the democracy of Mississippi—a partially true statement. Then followed what had been said a hundred times over during the months preceding the active campaign, that the "re-annexation of Texas was not a sectional question; for while it would afford peace and security to the South, to the North and West it would give new and ever augmenting markets." The paper closed with this significant statement: "Only those who sustain this great and truly American measure shall receive our cordial and undoubted support." Besides the names of Walker and Thompson, the address bore the signatures of T. M. Tucker, R. W. Roberts, W. H. Hammett, W. Smith, and C. A. Bradford—all party leaders within their own state, and one, the most resource-

²³ *Vicksburg Sentinel and Expositor*, May 21, 1844.

ful and astute politician of his day.²⁴ It was not without mis-giving that this bold stand was taken by the Mississippi delegation, and there can hardly be any doubt that the moving spirit in causing their instructions to be thrown to the winds was Robert J. Walker, the man who for eight years had been striving for the accomplishment of annexation. Three years before in writing to Van Buren about his financial losses, he had expressed his respect for the stainless purity and kindness which had invariably marked the ex-president's character as a man; now, as Benton puts it, he was the main-spring in all the movements against the former president.²⁵ Walker was zealously aided by "Jake" Thompson, as he was known in the parlance of the politicians, and by William M. Gwin, a leading figure in the political history of his state.

One of the members of the Mississippi delegation, writing long after the passions engendered by the campaign of 1844 had subsided, has this to say: "When Mr. Van Buren took ground adverse to the admission of Texas, it was after the convention of Mississippi had instructed the delegation in the Baltimore convention to support him for the nomination of President. My colleagues and myself, being delegates, at once determined to disobey instructions. I went to Mr. Walker and got him to join in an address to our constituents, advising them of our determination. We all knew that unless we could defeat Mr. Van Buren's nomination, this movement would prove our political defeat, and there were not a few at home who at first condemned our course. But it succeeded. Polk was nominated. Walker was put forth to do the speaking of our delegation in the convention: I became prominent only by my decisive course and firmness in keeping Mr. Walker from yielding to any compromise."²⁶ Though these words were written more than a generation after the events described, and after the two principal figures in the incident of the "lost commission" had become bitter enemies, there is no reason for doubting the substantial

²⁴ *Vicksburg Sentinel and Exposition*, May 21, 1844; *Mississippian*, May 22, 1844; *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 22, 1844. The address was dated May 5.

²⁵ Van Buren manuscripts, in library of congress. Cf. Thomas H. Benton, *Thirty years' view; or a history of the working of the American government for thirty years, from 1820 to 1850* (New York, 1856-1858), 2: 594.

²⁶ Claiborne correspondence.

accuracy of Thompson's statements. According to Thompson, his relations with Walker at this time were "most intimate." If we are to believe Thompson, no little part of the credit for Walker's famous letter on Texas annexation is due the former: ". . . in preparing it I was very often in his room: every part or paragraph was submitted to my criticism—and often my suggestion was taken."²⁷ Pillow and Bancroft each played his part in the nomination of Polk; it was into the mind of the latter, we are told, that the idea "flashed" of rallying upon the ex-governor of Tennessee. It is nevertheless true that "Mr. Robert J. Walker was the active manipulator of that memorable convention." By "renewing and vitalizing the rule of the democratic party whereby the candidate must secure two-thirds of all votes cast to receive the nomination," the "little senator" obtained complete control of that body. He had argued against the majority rule as enabling the delegates from hopeless whig states to overpower the really effective vote.²⁸

To Van Buren's supporters the Egyptian Hall at Baltimore must have been anything but a pleasant abode during the last days of May. Writing under date of May 27, one of his followers expressed himself thus: "The very atmosphere is burthened with the putrid odor of corruption so rotten and rife in men's hearts." "Intrigue is so active and treachery so corrupt that nothing can be relied on, and you must be prepared for the worst. I see and hear a great deal that almost turns my stomach." At half-past five on the morning of May 28, J. R. Livingston wrote as follows: "I cannot describe to you the treachery, deceit and base conspiracy."²⁹

Few tears were shed in Mississippi over the fall of Van Buren. Though a journal or two expressed the opinion that he had been done a grave injustice,³⁰ on the whole the democratic papers joyfully acclaimed the new leaders, Polk and Dallas. The *Free Trader* eulogized the unfortunate Van Buren, asserting that his

²⁷ Claiborne correspondence.

²⁸ Van Buren manuscripts, library of congress. Cf. Smith, *Annexation of Texas*, 251; William E. Dodd, *Expansion and conflict (Riverside history of the United States, vol. 3 — Boston, [1915])*, 129. According to Claiborne, Polk "owed his nomination more to Messrs. Walker, Gwin and Thompson, of Mississippi, than to any others in the Convention." *Mississippi as a province, territory and state*, 453.

²⁹ Van Buren manuscripts.

³⁰ *Columbus Democrat*, June 9, 1844.

name, with that of Jefferson and Jackson, would stand higher than all others, save that of Washington.³¹ In a similar strain the *Holly Springs Guard* wrote: "We know of no man in the State who can dare arrogate to himself as much of the love and veneration of her people as Martin Van Buren."³² But no condemnation was pronounced by a single editor upon the work of the Mississippi delegates in shelving the man who was now referred to in such an adulatory fashion. Whig sentiment found expression in a long article copied from the *Baltimore American* in the *Columbus Whig*. One sentence may be quoted as expressive of the whole: "He has fallen without dignity—fallen in the attitude of grasping eagerly at a prize which he thought was within his reach, but which was withdrawn from him with tantalizing contumely."³³

An aggressive campaign was made in Mississippi on the part of the democrats, with the result that the Polk and Dallas electors were chosen by a majority of something over five thousand votes. At least twelve per cent of this represented a defection on the part of the whigs dissatisfied with the stand of their party on the annexation question.³⁴

It was a foregone conclusion that Robert J. Walker would be a member of the new cabinet. He could easily have secured the endorsement of his state for the second place on the ticket but in a letter read to the convention assembled at Jackson on January 8, 1844, he declined to be a candidate for vice-president, the reason assigned being that his term in the senate did not expire until March 4, 1847, and as senator he could render the greatest service in furthering the cause of annexation. It is not difficult to believe that there were other reasons for Walker's declining to be sidetracked in this fashion, but reasons which it would not have been safe for him to avow at this stage.

It was in this same convention that Jefferson Davis spoke in terms of unstinted praise of John C. Calhoun, and of his advocacy of the annexation of Texas as being of vital importance to the south. Calhoun, Davis contended, could be depended upon

³¹ *Mississippi Free Trader*, June 12, 1844.

³² *Holly Springs Guard*, April 17, 1845.

³³ *Columbus Whig*, June 20, 1844.

³⁴ See maps in Arthur C. Cole, *The whig party in the south* (Washington, 1913), and in Dodd, *Expansion and conflict*.

to support this question with zeal and ability.³⁵ In striking contrast to the attacks made upon the different political leaders in the state at this time by partisan journals, Calhoun and Davis were uniformly spoken of in a courteous and complimentary manner by newspapers of all shades of political opinion. One of the leading whig organs referred to the great South Carolinian as "one of the brightest of America's jewels;"³⁶ the *Columbus Democrat* expressed the hope that Calhoun would remain in the cabinet, for he had ever proven himself a bulwark of defense for the south.³⁷ In connection with the Oregon question, which was linked up with the Texas program at the Baltimore convention,³⁸ the *Vicksburg Sentinel* declared there was "no man so admirably fashioned to conduct a negotiation of such vast magnitude and peculiar delicacy;" his conduct of the state department had more than ever identified him with the south, and this at a time when the moral and religious feeling of the world was being arrayed by scheming politicians against southern institutions.³⁹ The *Guard*, published at Holly Springs, the rallying-point of the democracy of north Mississippi, characterized the South Carolina statesman as "the great champion of the South and southern interests;" it solemnly affirmed the Oregon and Texas questions to be of deep and lasting moment to the south and west, upon the issue of which rested the perpetuity of southern domestic institutions.⁴⁰

But Calhoun failed to be retained as secretary of state by the new administration. The *Southern Reformer*, one of the leading democratic organs in the state, protested against what it termed base and insidious attempts to prejudice Polk's administration against him; the *Port Gibson Herald* observed that "Calhounism has fought its last battle and been betrayed by those in whom it trusted."⁴¹ Two years later the president was

³⁵ *Mississippi Free Trader*, January 24, 1844.

³⁶ *Vicksburg Weekly Whig*, November 11, 1845.

³⁷ *Columbus Democrat*, February 22, 1845.

³⁸ Cf. Clark E. Persinger, "The 'bargain of 1844' as the origin of the Wilmot proviso," in American historical association, *Annual report*, 1911 (Washington, 1913), 1: 189-195.

³⁹ *Vicksburg Sentinel*, April 22, 1844; January 20, 1845.

⁴⁰ *Holly Springs Guard*, February 14, March 27, 1844; *Columbus Democrat*, February 1, 1845. Cf. Reeves, *American diplomacy under Tyler and Polk*, 137.

⁴¹ *Port Gibson Herald*, April 17, 1845.

recording in his diary some bitter comments in connection with the rumors that Calhoun had come out for General Taylor for president, even going so far as to denounce him as "wholly destitute of political principle"⁴²—a most unwarranted charge, and evidently penned at a time when the president's mind was overwrought by idle rumors.

Claiborne's statement that Polk had given a voluntary pledge not to be a candidate for reelection seems highly improbable,⁴³ otherwise why should Polk have been so sensitive about the succession? It is not surprising, however, that the president should have had misgivings about the ambitions of his secretary of the treasury. Under date of January 18, 1846, the president tells how Walker entered into a very solemn and earnest conversation in relation to his position in the administration; he alluded to the fact that he had political enemies among the democratic senators, but disavowed their apprehensions in regard to his being a candidate for the presidency. Walker assured the president that he would publish a letter to that effect if it were deemed necessary. To this Polk replied that he had received letters from his cabinet to that effect before their appointment. "He (i.e., Walker) said he was the object of violent attack and, with much agitation & feeling, said he would retire from the Cabinet the moment I was of opinion his remaining in it would embarrass the administration."⁴⁴ Walker was given to agitation, and, it would seem, should have become hardened to the assaults of his political enemies by this time. For ten years the democratic journals of Mississippi had been defending Walker against what they termed the "foul aspersions" cast upon both his public and private character by the "whig presses and scribblers." His unfortunate financial experiences offered a vulnerable side to the attacks of a partisan press, while his shrewd and successful political methods, resembling those of the modern boss, were the despair of the whig leaders. The following excerpt is from one of the leading whig organs: "Little Senator

⁴² *The diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849, now first printed from the original manuscript in the collections of the Chicago historical society*, edited by Milo M. Quaife (Chicago, 1910), 2: 470.

⁴³ Claiborne, *Mississippi as a province, territory and state*, 452.

⁴⁴ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 1: 177.

Walker has gone away again to the inexpressible grief and mortification of the good people hereabouts. After remaining in the neighborhood for a few days, appearing occasionally to gladden the hearts of his loving subjects, the dear little man has again left us . . . Where he lives, we have not been able for the life of us to find out.”⁴⁵

In this connection it is interesting to recall that one of Walker's staunchest defenders during the campaign of 1844 was the *Free Trader*, which at this time was edited without remuneration by the distinguished Mississippian, Colonel John F. H. Claiborne. Claiborne later became very bitter toward Walker, a feeling which mars his sketch of Walker in his history, only exceeded in vindictiveness by his life of Poindexter in the same volume.⁴⁶ This prejudice against Walker seems to have been intensified while Claiborne was collecting material for his first volume, though the root of it is to be found in events which transpired years earlier. Claiborne felt, and with justice, that he had been badly treated by the party leaders of his own state; but if we are to believe William M. Gwin, from whose gossip letters Claiborne derived no little information about their contemporaries, Walker had nothing directly to do with Claiborne's being “outlawed by the leaders of our own party after your failure to secure a re-election”—referring to the congressional campaign of 1837. In this same connection Gwin wrote: “The result you cannot have forgotten for it consigned you to private life instead of . . . a great public career . . . Thus I consider Foote did you a greater injury than any man dead or alive.”⁴⁷ No one will regret that Claiborne was balked in his political aspirations, for Mississippi history would almost be as if it were not had not her foremost historian devoted his life to preserving the history of his native state. Much of his work was done “in declining health, in pain and suffering,” and this

⁴⁵ *Weekly Courier and Journal*, August 16, 1843. This was a reference to the charge that Walker's domicile was in Louisiana. Cf. *Mississippi Free Trader*, May 1, October 23, 1844; *Mississippian*, July 5, November 6, 1844; *Port Gibson Herald*, April 17, 1845; *Columbus Democrat*, March 22, 1845.

⁴⁶ In another connection Gwin wrote to Claiborne: “I must express my regret that you consider it a duty you owe to yourself in writing the history of your native state, to place Mr. Walker in an unfavorable position before the people he so ably represented in the Senate and in the Cabinet.” Claiborne correspondence.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

goes a long way toward atoning for the shortcomings in what was with him a labor of love.

Though the defects and failings in Walker's character are obvious, in some of his letters the man is revealed in a more pleasing light than it is customary to think of him. He was an indulgent father and, in the heyday of his prosperity, lavished his money upon the members of his family and household when traveling in state in Europe. Writing on one occasion to John A. Quitman, he refers to the deep affliction which had come upon him in the death of a sister to whom he was most devotedly attached, a loss which had for some time disqualified him for all business affairs. Though Calhoun's political opponent, he affected the very highest respect for the talents and integrity of that eminent statesman, extolling the latter quality as one all the more to be cherished since it was so rare, and one which should be deemed by the people an indispensable prerequisite of political preferment. Some of his letters to Claiborne, written in 1842, breathe a most friendly spirit: "You must write to me as fully as you would to a Brother and let me know all your wishes and prospects, and rest assured you will have my head and heart both at work to accomplish whatever you may desire in this matter. In looking back from your boyhood to the present period we have always been friends. I am deeply your debtor for kindness and support in every emergency, and I am not ungrateful."⁴⁸ Walker belonged to a group of aggressive and not overscrupulous politicians, and was perhaps no better or no worse than a number of others who might be mentioned, though excelling them all in energy, in talents, and in resourcefulness. To one of Polk's straightforward nature, there were times when the actions of his able secretary occasioned serious perplexity of mind. Such an occasion was Walker's abrupt leaving for New York in order to negotiate a loan, which drew forth the following comment: "I cannot understand the necessity for all this secrecy and mystery in the movements of the Secretary . . . Why was his note without date and not delivered till noon to-day?"⁴⁹ Later when Walker's health was greatly impaired by his assiduous labors in connection with the duties of his office, the president expressed deep regret at his

⁴⁸ Claiborne correspondence.

⁴⁹ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 2: 166.

inability to perform the exacting requirements of his office, and spoke nothing but the simple truth when he characterized him as a "very able & indefatigable man."⁵⁰ On one occasion Walker was taken suddenly ill in the Treasury building, where he would stay for days and nights at a time working on his reports. Contemporaries have testified to his arduous labors in the performance of the duties of his office. One who knew him intimately spoke of him as follows: "With all his defects and failings he was a wonderfully great man. He was one of the few men I have met in my long career in active political life of that extensive information which caused me to look up to him as an authority. He was one of the best informed men I ever knew—a walking library." In another connection the same writer referred to Walker's great talents and wonderful acquirements. "He had every page of our history at his finger's end, and there are events in his public life that will place him in the front rank of American statesmen."⁵¹

Claiborne has related the circumstances under which Walker became secretary of the treasury.⁵² His informant was Jacob Thompson, whose letter dealing with the subject is printed in his history, and which was written some thirty-three years after the events described. Since the phraseology of the printed letter differs as to details from the original, the latter is here reproduced: "When Polk was elected, Walker came to me and said he wished to become a member of his cabinet—he wanted my help. My relations with Pres. Polk prior to his election were good, I might say intimate. I promised Mr. Walker my zealous support and told him I must manage matters in my own way except that I would join the whole delegation in a general letter to the president . . . On the 3rd of March, 1845, Mr. Walker came to me and told me confidentially Pres^t Polk had just informed him that the only thing he could do for him (Walker) was to give him the office of Attorney-General. I felt indignant and told Mr. Walker in plain terms that after we had made the fight for Secretary of State or Secretary of the Treasury, for him now to take the office of Attorney-General was to let him

⁵⁰ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 3: 10, 12, 18, 27, 96.

⁵¹ Claiborne correspondence.

⁵² Claiborne, *Mississippi as a province, territory and state*, 438, 439, 453.

down and was no better than defeat. He argued with me at great length that he had better take it than be defeated altogether. I told him I was surprised at his position and he would take it at my most earnest protest both to himself and the President. He requested me then to see the President, but not to decline for him the Attorney Generalship. I did see the President on the night of the 3rd and saw him alone. I told him as a friend I insisted that he should recast his cabinet—that he was about to do a heinous injustice to my friend, etc. He took his list while I was present, formed and reformed it, and finally put in Walker as Secretary of the Treasury, wrote in the other names and assured me so it would stand. I went to Mr. Walker that night, told him how matters stood and that the President had assured me he would not change it. He seized me by the hand, thanked me, and said your zeal and unwillingness to yield had saved him a mortification to which he had made up his mind to submit.”⁵³

Writing to Claiborne many years after this time, W. M. Gwin has this to say: “As to Polk’s cabinet, there are three living witnesses that can certify for each other, who placed Buchanan, Marcy and Walker in the cabinet. These three are Simon Cameron, of Pennsylvania, Col. J. D. Stephenson, of San Francisco, colonel of a regiment sent to the coast during the Mexican war, and myself. Cameron got what he bargained for; so did Stephenson. I got nothing. Walker was already appointed Attorney-General, and Bancroft Secretary of the Treasury, when the combination was made that formed Polk’s cabinet.”⁵⁴

Walker’s appointment, whatever may have been the precise circumstances under which it was made, certainly could have occasioned no surprise to those in touch with the new administration. The Washington correspondent of the *Columbus Democrat*, writing under date of January 24, announced that Buchanan and Walker would be in the cabinet, the latter probably as secretary of state, “though he does not covet cabinet honors; will be Secretary of the Treasury, for here he can do most for the South in the way of tariff and public lands.”⁵⁵ One whig

⁵³ Claiborne correspondence.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Columbus Democrat*, February 8, 1845.

journal observed that so far as the cabinet was concerned, Pennsylvania and New York were the winners, for R. J. Walker was a Pennsylvanian by feeling as well as by birth, and had always been noted for his consistent opposition to Calhounism and nullification.⁵⁶

Walker resigned from the senate on February 11. A few weeks later, on March 5, he was handed a sealed package by Dr. Tate, of Columbus, Mississippi, a local politician of some prominence. Tate was acting as the messenger of Governor A. G. Brown, then serving his second term, and was also the bearer of letters to Gwin and Thompson. As was later disclosed, the package contained a commission for Thompson as successor to Walker in the senate. In his letter to Walker, the governor explained that his tendered resignation was not *absolutely* accepted, but that he might withdraw it at any time up to March 10, in which event he was to destroy the commission for Thompson; otherwise Thompson was to serve the unexpired term of Walker, that is, till March 4, 1847, or "until he shall be superseded by an election by the Legislature." Thompson's appointment had been decided upon February 21, and was to be in force "from and after March 10."⁵⁷ As a matter of fact Walker did not resign, and Thompson according to his own account never had any inkling of the governor's intention until his return home. At the very time indeed when Thompson was exerting himself in Walker's behalf for a place in the cabinet, the latter had the commission in his pocket, but failed to make any mention of it to Thompson. To quote Thompson's own words: ". . . Governor Brown in the meantime wrote me and asked me if I thought Walker would get a place in the cabinet. I replied I thought he would succeed. Knowing that a session of the Senate would be called on March 5th, and wishing Mississippi to be represented in that session, he filled up a commission appointing me Senator to fill the vacancy made by Robt. J. Walker, leaving the date only blank. This he forwarded to Mr. Walker . . . When I returned home in March, 1845, I found myself unanimously nominated for Congress, and immediately I accepted the nomination. Then it was Governor Brown

⁵⁶ *Port Gibson Herald*, April 17, 1845.

⁵⁷ Executive journal, manuscript in state archives of Mississippi.

invited me to meet him in Grenada. I did so. He told me how he had issued the commission—that Dr. Gwin had strongly urged him to appoint him; that Walker was in favor of Gwin's appointment, that he had declined to do so, and was surprised that Walker had not delivered the senatorial commission to me, and he then wished me to accept it. Gwin, he said would be a candidate for the Senate, Quitman, Foote and some [word illegible]. I told him had the commission come into my hands while at Washington, I should have accepted, and thanked him—but now I had accepted the nomination of the Convention and I would not embarrass the party by forcing them to make a new nomination. At my suggestion he then and there appointed Judge Chalmers.

“At that time Dr. Gwin had felt himself greatly aggrieved with me because I had opposed and defeated a bill in which he was deeply interested which on its face purported to be for the relief of the Chickasaw Indians. This led to a serious controversy between Gwin and myself which terminated in Gwin sending me a challenge. I called in Quitman and Jeff Davis as my friends, and they adjusted the matter without a meeting. The result to both Walker and Gwin of this controversy was that I was returned to Congress by the largest popular majority ever received by any man in the State up to that time. I never spoke to Walker or Gwin until I was a member of Mr. Buchanan's Cabinet—that is we never spoke from 1845 to 1861, and then for a while only on official business.”⁵⁸

With this recital of the circumstances connected with the lost commission may be compared two contemporary accounts of the same affair by Thompson. One of these is his letter to Governor Brown declining the appointment of senator; and the other written nearly five months later is an address to the people of Mississippi upon the same subject. The letter was written from Oxford, his home, and bears date of April 12, a letter from Governor Brown and a duplicate commission having been received the day previous. In this the writer says: “Had the commis-

⁵⁸ Claiborne correspondence. Mrs. Rosa B. Tyler, of Holly Springs, a daughter of Roger Barton, has informed the writer that the unexpired term was offered her father. “My father declined on the score of a delicate wife who could hardly assume the responsibility of a family in his absence. But he added: ‘Appoint my friend Chalmers, and I will esteem it a favor to me.’”

sion reached me while in Washington, I should have accepted the honor and entered upon the discharge of its duties." But after the adjournment of the senate the high trust confided to him would have been laid down. For to retain the position he must become a candidate before the ensuing legislature—a thing which might be provocative of party division, and which might imperil the unity and success of the party; he therefore welcomes self-effacement, if that will leave the party free and untrammelled in the choice of a candidate.⁵⁹

The address published in the following September has a different tone, and is in the nature of a whitewash of Walker's conduct in suppressing the commission; it is thus seen that it expressed anything but the real feelings of the writer. In this he states that he cannot believe Walker was influenced by any motive or consideration of a personal nature, inasmuch as he had supported the secretary of the treasury in his aspirations for a cabinet position. Walker evidently misunderstood the wishes and feelings of Governor Brown in the matter. Thompson assures the public that at no time had he felt one moment's mortification at the course of events. In conclusion Thompson tells his constituents that he would never have accepted the commission had Walker intimated he had one!⁶⁰ The address thus constitutes a flat contradiction of the sentiments of Thompson as set forth in his letters to Claiborne and to Governor Brown. What is the explanation of this inconsistency? Evidently his chief concern was to avoid saying anything that might be construed as a reflection upon Walker; it was eminently desirable to keep on good terms with the head of the treasury department who had control of a considerable amount of patronage. Walker was a politician whose enmity was not lightly to be incurred. On the other hand it is perfectly clear that Thompson nursed a deep resentment against Walker—a resentment that manifested itself in indirect attacks upon that individual during the following summer.

Long before the appearance of this address, the story of the suppressed commission had become noised about, and a bitter newspaper war of crimination and recrimination ensued. It was

⁵⁹ *Columbus Democrat*, May 3, 1845.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, September 27, 1845.

nothing new for the whig journals to denounce Walker and his methods, but now a considerable portion of the democratic press within the state joined in the attack. The most violent and persistent of these was the *Vicksburg Sentinel*, the organ of McNutt, who, with Quitman, Gwin, and Foote were rivals for Walker's seat in the senate. The *Sentinel* called upon Polk to dismiss Walker from the cabinet. The *Vicksburg Whig* characterized Walker's conduct in withholding the commission as a flagrant outrage upon public justice, an insult to the state without parallel. The same journal protested that he would never rest satisfied until he was secretary of state and would break up the cabinet in order to attain his object.⁶¹ Among the more prominent journals which undertook the defense of Walker were the *Southern Reformer*, the *Mississippian*, and the *Columbus Democrat*. The last named journal commended Governor Brown for what it termed his independence in appointing a successor to Senator Walker.⁶² The *Holly Springs Guard* approved of Thompson's appointment, though it favored the claims of the "old war horse of Democracy," Roger Barton.⁶³ Barton had been one of the candidates to succeed Henderson, a whig senator, "who had displayed Roman firmness and patriotism upon the Texas question." Reluctance to choose a man from the northern part of the state, however, had led to the choice of General Speight.

During all the newspaper controversy upon the subject of the lost commission, Walker had maintained silence. Finally on June 16 he issued a statement from Washington justifying his course of action. In this he proceeded to tell how on March 5 he had received a confidential communication and the commission for Jacob Thompson, the latter to take effect five days later. It seems that the governor had been induced to make this appointment "in consequence of assurances from me, that my own vote, or that of my successor, might, in all probability, would be necessary, to give the Democratic party a majority in the Senate upon the election of a printer for two years at the executive session." The resignation had left twenty-four whigs and an equal

⁶¹ *Vicksburg Whig*, April 7, June 18, 1845.

⁶² *Columbus Democrat*, March 29, April 5, May 17, 1845.

⁶³ *Holly Springs Guard*, April 10, 1845.

number of democrats in the senate, exclusive of the vote of the presiding officer. In the opinion of Walker a full discretion had been given him by Governor Brown to deliver the commission or not. Since the contingency anticipated by Walker had not arisen—the senate having determined not to go into the election of a printer—the delivery of the commission under such circumstances would, according to him, have violated the will and purpose of the executive and the “confidential trust and discretion developed by him to me.” It was clear, argued Walker, that if the governor had been present he would not have delivered the commission until the contingency had happened; it was the property of the governor and not of the person named until its delivery to him. This recalls the well-known case of *Marbury v. Madison*, with which Walker was certainly perfectly familiar, though he could have argued the circumstances in the two instances were not the same. Finally it is stated that there was no hostility between Thompson and himself: “no man exerted himself more warmly and efficiently . . . to place me in my present position as secretary of the treasury.”⁶⁴

It is thus seen that Walker’s defense of his action in withholding the commission turned upon the fact that the instructions imposed upon him by Governor Brown prevented him from acting in the premises, which instructions had resulted only from the assurances made by him to the executive as to the great importance attaching to the election of a printer. In this stand he was supported by the *Columbus Democrat*, which, among other journals, argued that inasmuch as the contingency referred to had not arisen, Walker was not called upon to assume any responsibility in the matter; it expressed doubt, however, as to the legality of an appointment made in this manner.⁶⁵ It now became incumbent upon Governor Brown to state his side of the case, for at a meeting of the members of his own party in Madison county he was called upon to explain the facts to the public. Accordingly on June 23 the governor issued a brief statement from the executive mansion in Jackson, the purport of which was that he had instructed Walker that his resignation was not absolutely accepted, but that it might be withdrawn at

⁶⁴ *Holly Springs Guard*, July 17, 1845.

⁶⁵ *Columbus Democrat*, May 17, 1845.

any time up to March 10; that the appointment had been hastily made in anticipation of the emergency, arising at the executive session; he furthermore admitted that his appointment of Thompson was due to his reluctance to interfere in a controversy between friends.⁶⁶

The publication of the letters of Walker and Brown was the signal for a bitter expression of protest on the part of the whig journals, and of a not inconsiderable number of democratic papers within the state. The *Port Gibson Herald* referred to the high-handed act of a notorious demagogue in retaining in his possession the credentials of Thompson.⁶⁷ The *Vicksburg Whig* characterized Walker's statement as "a contemptible attempt at quibbling," his real object being to defeat the choice of Gale and Seaton as public printers.⁶⁸ By the *Panola Lynx* the incident of the lost commission was cited as an instance of "one of the strongest characteristics of Mississippi democracy—recklessness in political morals." Behind Thompson's smooth words it discerned between the lines of his address his true feelings in the matter—that he considered the suppression of the commission as an outrage upon the people of Mississippi and as utterly unjustifiable and inexcusable on the part of Walker. It attributed his soreness, however, to the fact that he had not been admitted to a share in the speculations in which others were engaged; hence the "holy shudders which 'Jake' was having at the 'enormities' which Walker and Gwin were attempting to perpetrate," since the two latter, it was well known, were itching for the rich attorneys' fees in connection with the Chickasaw claims.⁶⁹ Governor Brown's card, in the opinion of the *Raymond Gazette*, was an admission that the appointment was bad since his action, according to his own statement, was due to his reluctance to interfere in a controversy between friends; as a matter of fact no real vacancy had existed, since Walker's resignation was not absolutely accepted.⁷⁰ No journal was so persistent and so vicious in its assaults upon Walker as the *Vicksburg Sentinel*, which declared that his appointment to the post

⁶⁶ *Columbus Democrat*, July 5, 1845.

⁶⁷ *Port Gibson Herald*, June 19, 1845.

⁶⁸ *Vicksburg Whig*, July 12, 1845.

⁶⁹ *Panola Lynx*, July 19, September 13, 1845.

⁷⁰ *Raymond Gazette*, July 4, 1845.

of secretary of the treasury shocked all sense of propriety and was an injurious scandal to the national name on account of the incumbent's bad fame regarding his pecuniary transactions, and on account of his having openly advocated repudiation of his state's debts. As to the suppressed commission, the transaction wore an aspect of the most barefaced usurpation, if not corruption. Walker was charged with having directed Governor Brown to appoint Gwin as his successor, and with suppressing Brown's private letter to Thompson. At Washington it had been spoken of as a fixed thing that Gwin would go into the senate in Walker's place. The truth of the matter was that the Chickasaw bill, which had been defeated through Thompson's efforts, was at the bottom of the whole affair. The *Sentinel* called upon President Polk at once to dismiss Walker from his cabinet. In its issues of September 12 and 17, it asked Governor Brown to publish the letters between himself and Walker. To this the governor replied as follows: "You ask me to say whether I will communicate the whole correspondence to the Legislature. Mr. Walker's letter and all other papers and correspondence of a public character in the Executive office will be submitted to the Legislature or any body else whenever a desire is expressed to see them. What I would do should the Legislature demand of me private and confidential letters to me by Mr. Walker or anybody else, it is now unnecessary to determine."⁷¹ The issue, declared the *Sentinel*, was reduced to one of fact: Walker's contention was that he was authorized to suppress the commission if no election for printer took place; while Governor Brown had said he was authorized to suppress it, if he did not resign.⁷²

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that the assaults of such journals as the *Sentinel* upon Walker were due primarily to zeal for the public welfare; violent abuse was a characteristic weapon of factional politics of that day even as it is of our own. It was this same journal that, edited by one Hagan, had done its utmost a few years before to hound Prentiss from the state.

The only reference to the lost commission by Gwin that has been noticed in the Claiborne correspondence is the following: "In regard to the lost commission we might differ very mate-

⁷¹ *Vicksburg Sentinel*, June 6, 19, July 4, 18, 21, 25, August 11, 13, 15, September 12, 17, 23, 1845.

⁷² *Ibid.*, October 20, 1845.

rially in the facts as well as inferences. They (i.e. Thompson and Brown) can compare notes and agree while I know nothing of what they think or may say. I know both were on very friendly terms with Walker after that event, and I doubt the propriety of striking him now. As to my action in the matter I have no regrets nor have I now any concealments. Strange to say the subject was never alluded to between Thompson and myself during Buchanan's administration, and afterwards in Europe we were perfectly confidential with each other on all matters." At this time Gwin was far from being on the best of terms with the party leaders in his own state, while like Walker he was cordially despised by the whigs. His subsequent relations with Governor Brown are referred to in a pointed manner: being assailed by Brown after Gwin's election as senator from California, "I struck him in the face the hardest blow I could with pen and ink . . . for years we were in the Senate without any personal intercourse or allusion to each other in debate."⁷³ It will be noted that what Gwin has to say about the relations of Walker and Thompson subsequent to 1845 is refuted by Thompson's statement quoted above. "I could never tolerate Walker," Thompson wrote Claiborne years later.⁷⁴

This bitterness entertained toward Walker by Thompson led to an attempt by the latter to defeat the nomination of Dr. James H. Tate as consul to Buenos Ayres. Tate, it will be recalled, was the intermediary between Governor Brown and Walker at the time of the latter's contemplated resignation from the senate. Tate had been appointed by President Polk during a recess of the senate, and had left for his post of duty some time during the summer or fall of the first year of the new administration.⁷⁵ In December Polk was called upon by Thompson, who insisted upon the president's withdrawing the nomination of Tate; Thompson "insisted that he had . . . been guilty of duplicity in his intercourse with him." Receiving no assurances from the president that his request would be complied with, "he left apparently disappointed, and I judged from his manner & con-

⁷³ Claiborne correspondence. On September 11, 1850, Brown, then in the senate, made an attack upon Gwin's claim.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* Cf. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a province, territory and state*, 439.

⁷⁵ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 1: 166.

versation was much dissatisfied." A few days later the two Mississippi senators, Chalmers and Speight, called at the White House to consult the president in regard to Tate's nomination; Speight advised strongly against its withdrawal, pointing out that Thompson had been one of those who had recommended Tate.⁷⁶ About the middle of January Polk was visited by Walker, who suggested the withdrawal of Tate's nomination; this suggestion the president carried out. This action was taken on account of the secretary of the treasury's having represented that Tate's good faith had been assailed by Thompson before the senate or in the presence of individual senators, and he thought unless the charges were refuted by Tate, he would be rejected by the senate.⁷⁷ The day following the president records in his diary how he was called on by Senator Haywood, of North Carolina, who told him the Mississippi senators were "mistaken friends and bad counsellors, and had not treated me well." They informed the president that on the day previous to the withdrawal of the nomination a resolution had been offered in executive session, calling upon Walker to answer the charges made by Thompson to the senate against Tate; that the withdrawal "would have the appearance of my having done so to screen & save my Secretary of the Treasury." The president expressed surprise at the pendency of such a resolution touching Walker, and wrote, "I was deeply mortified that I had been placed in so false a position before the Senate."⁷⁸ Upon Sunday, January 18, Walker appeared with a letter signed by the two Mississippi senators containing their justification for advising the withdrawal of the nomination; their explanation was as follows: "It had not occurred to us that there was a resolution pending to call upon the Hon. R. J. Walker for further testimony in this matter, nor had we stated this to any one out of the Senate."⁷⁹ Walker likewise expressed surprise at the existence of such a resolution; he moreover assured the president there was

⁷⁶ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 1: 127, 132.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2: 166.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 168.

⁷⁹ From the *Executive journal* of the senate it appears that Tate's nomination was recommitted to the committee on commerce, which committee was instructed to transmit the communication of Thompson respecting the nominee to the secretary of the treasury "in order to afford that officer an opportunity to answer or explain such parts of the same as he may be desirous to do."

nothing in his conduct nor that of Tate to censure.⁸⁰ The upshot of the matter was that Tate, returning about this time, was renominated. Walker read to the president and Marcy a letter addressed to the committee of commerce to which had been referred Tate's nomination, containing an answer to Thompson's charges assailing Walker. "Mr. Walker's answer is a full & triumphant vindication of himself and Dr. Tate." He moreover showed the president the correspondence between himself and Tate during the previous summer, which placed Thompson in a "very awkward light." "Mr. Thompson's conduct in the affair was vindictive and without excuse."⁸¹

The entire incident affords a singular commentary upon Thompson's address quoted above, and is also interesting as showing how, as in the matter of Walker's position in the cabinet, he succeeded in reassuring the president of the integrity of his intentions and conduct.

It will be recalled that the reasons assigned by Thompson for Walker's suppressing the senatorial commission were due to the latter's chagrin at his failure to secure the appointment of W. M. Gwin as his successor. Reference has also been made to the fact that a bitter enmity existed between Thompson and Gwin on account of the former's having brought about the defeat of a bill having to do with certain claims of the Chickasaw Indians, the passage of which was being pressed by Gwin and Walker. Gwin denied that Walker had any interest in the Chickasaw land claims,⁸² while Gwin's connection with these claims is not alluded to by Claiborne in his sketch of Gwin in his history. Years later when Claiborne was gathering material for these biographical sketches, Gwin wrote him as follows: "In 1850 I made an elaborate report of my connection with the Chickasaw tribe of Indians, and although Thompson was then in Congress and my enemy, the House exonerated me from all blame . . . all these Indian matters were personal controversies involving no political principle and the interest they excited died out in the generation in which they occurred."⁸³ It is hardly a matter of

⁸⁰ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 1: 175-177.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 179, 239.

⁸² *Vicksburg Weekly Whig*, July 30, 1845.

⁸³ Claiborne correspondence. For Gwin's report, see *Congressional globe*, 31 congress, 1 session, appendix, 22: pt. 2, 1224-1234.

surprise that the interest excited by the question of the Indian claims should have died out; having obtained possession of the vast tracts once held by the Choctaw and the Chickasaw and turned them into cotton-growing plantations, the planters and the political leaders of their respective sections devoted all their energies to defending and extending the social and industrial institutions upon which rested the prosperity and political influence of the south.

The story of Gwin's connection with the Choctaw and Chickasaw claims is a long and involved one, and one that it is difficult to summarize without going into details beyond the scope of this paper. During the decade previous to the administration of Polk the names of some of the leading members of the democratic party in Mississippi were involved in frauds arising out of the speculations that ensued as a consequence of the opening up for settlement of the vast and fertile holdings of the Indians.⁸⁴ In 1835 Hiram G. Runnels and F. E. Plummer were engaged in a bitter and unseemly controversy in connection with the land sales at Chocchuma in 1833.⁸⁵ "Nowhere," says a recent writer, "was the spirit to despoil the natives more rampant than in Mississippi."⁸⁶ The lands of the Choctaw had been ceded in 1830 by the famous treaty of Dancing Rabbit—a treaty "simply made by intimidation and coercion."⁸⁷ The "history of the third Choctaw cession from the beginning of the negotiations at Dancing Rabbit Creek to the final execution of the treaty there made is characterized by violence, intimidation and fraud on the part of the white people."⁸⁸ So notorious were the frauds which arose in connection with the sales of these lands that a senate committee was appointed to investigate them: two of the five whig members were Poindexter and Prentiss; the former's influence was now rapidly on the wane; Prentiss clashed fiercely

⁸⁴ Among the lists of purchasers of land at Columbus and Chocchuma in 1833 and 1834 the name of R. J. Walker occurs nearly five hundred and fifty times. See *American state papers: public lands*, 7: 377-447. For Walker's defense against the charges brought against him, see *ibid.*, 8: 711-788.

⁸⁵ *Columbus Democratic Press*, September 25, 1835.

⁸⁶ See William E. Dodd, *Robert J. Walker, imperialist* ([Chicago], 1914).

⁸⁷ Cf. Halbert, "Story of the treaty of Dancing Rabbit," in *Mississippi historical society, Publications*, 6: 373-402.

⁸⁸ The most complete account of this affair is that by F. L. Riley, "Choctaw land claims," in *ibid.*, 8: 345-395.

some years later with John F. H. Claiborne at the time of the latter's fearless probing of the scandals associated with the Choctaw claims.⁸⁹ According to Claiborne William M. Gwin was a member of the company of speculators interested in the lands in the Yazoo valley; the receiver of the land office deposed that Gwin "appeared to be active in all the operations going on among those speculating in lands."⁹⁰ More than a decade later, those journals friendly to McNutt in his canvass for the senate were using against Gwin "his supposed Choctaw speculations."⁹¹ The *Vicksburg Sentinel* mentioned Gwin as interested in those speculations which the legislature characterized as "profligate and infamous."⁹²

It is in connection with the Chickasaw tribe, however, that we find Gwin's name frequently occurring in connection with a claim for services rendered that nation; this claim was persistently pressed by him during a period of several years. By the treaties of 1832 and 1834 the Chickasaw had ceded some seven millions of acres in Mississippi and Alabama to the United States. By the third article of the treaty of October 20, 1832, the United States "agreed to pay over to the Chickasaw nation all the money arising from the sale of land which may be received from time to time, after deducting therefrom the whole cost and expense of surveying and selling the land, including every expense attending the same." Another article of the same treaty provided for the laying out of the funds derived from the sale of their lands in "safe and valuable stocks" for the use and benefit of the Chickasaw nation. A large amount of this purchase money was invested in the stocks of several states; by 1844 arrears of interest amounting to several millions of dollars had accrued.⁹³ In 1837 the commissioner of Indian affairs despatched an agent to Cincinnati to purchase provisions and other things for the use of the Chickasaw; the sum of \$144,000 was expended for this purpose. The Indians alleged that they received benefits to the extent of only \$32,000, and refused to be charged with the re-

⁸⁹ Mississippi historical society, Publications, 8: 345-395; see also *Vicksburg Sentinel* for the years 1842 and 1844.

⁹⁰ *American state papers: public lands*, 7: 506; see also *Senate documents*, 28 congress, 1 session, 3: no. 168.

⁹¹ *Panola Lynx*, August 2, 1845.

⁹² *Vicksburg Sentinel*, April 29, 1845.

⁹³ *Senate documents*, 28 congress, 2 session, 2: no. 49.

maining \$112,000.⁹⁴ In 1844 Dr. Gwin was empowered by a portion of the Chickasaw to conduct certain fiscal operations on their behalf with the United States government. The first contract with the Indians seems to have been rescinded; the second, it was charged, bore no date. On September 8, 1846, the second auditor of the treasury certified there was due William M. Gwin the sum of \$56,021.49, this being one-half of the amount due the Indians for the purchase of provisions at Cincinnati in 1837. Another charge upon the Chickasaw fund, an itemized statement of which was printed by the government, was the sum of \$5,160.15, this being one-half of what was said to be due Gwin on account of lands sold at Chocchuma and Columbus.⁹⁵ On September 9, 1846, Gwin transferred his interest in the larger claim to Corcoran and Riggs, of Washington, D. C. On March 12, 1850, this firm receipted for a requisition on the treasury for the amount of the claim.

It was in this same year that the department of the interior under Secretary Ewing was made the subject of a prolonged congressional investigation. A majority of a committee appointed by the house under a resolution bearing date of April 22, 1850, put itself upon record as follows: "Resolved, 'That the sum of \$56,021.49, paid to Messrs. Corcoran and Riggs, as assignees of William M. Gwin, was justly due the Chickasaw Indians, and was improperly paid to Corcoran and Riggs.'"⁹⁶ This opinion was based in part upon the fact that the king of the Chickasaw affirmed that Gwin's contract or power of attorney had never been signed by him; upon a deposition of a member of the tribe that the power of attorney was signed after the resignation of the commissioners; the second contract, it was furthermore alleged, bore no date; and upon the fact that Marcy and William Medill, the commissioner of Indian affairs, had refused to sanction the claim.⁹⁷

Further light is thrown upon the history of this claim by certain interesting references to it in President Polk's diary. In September, 1846, the matter was brought to his attention by a clerk in the treasury department. "He informed me that Doc-

⁹⁴ *Congressional globe*, 31 congress, 1 session, appendix, 22: pt. 2, 1282.

⁹⁵ *Executive documents*, 29 congress, 2 session, 4: no. 94.

⁹⁶ *Congressional globe*, 31 congress, 1 session, appendix, 22: pt. 2, 1220, ff.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

tor Gwin was the agent possessing this claim, and he was now in Washington pressing it; . . . Mr. Cutts (the clerk) said it was a claim improperly allowed." The president's attention was called to the fact that the claim had been before congress during the session of 1844-1845, it being defeated at that time by Cave Johnson; a report was made in favor of the claim at the same time, however, by R. J. Walker.⁹⁸ Not only, it was pointed out, had the accounting officers in Tyler's administration refused to sanction the claim; a long session of congress had intervened without that body taking any action in the matter, though of course the inaction of congress in the matter did not of itself imply condemnation of the lawfulness of the claim. The president thereupon sent for the secretary of war, who made known that he had just had a discussion with Dr. Gwin about the claim and had refused to sign a requisition for the money; he did not know how such a claim could have passed the accounting offices of the treasury. "He alluded to the opinion of the secretary of the Treasury that the claim ought to be paid, as the cause of his embarrassment in acting upon it." The day following the president recorded in his diary that the secretary of war had examined anew the claim of Dr. William M. Gwin upon the Chickasaw Indian fund, and found it to be "a much worse case than he had supposed it was on yesterday." Polk's conclusion as to the whole affair was that it was "a singular transaction."⁹⁹

In Claiborne's sketch of Gwin in his history the matter of the Indian claims is not alluded to: this may be accounted for by the fact that Claiborne took Gwin's view of the claims as being merely of transient interest; perhaps he may have been influenced in part by the desire of Gwin that he should appear at his best when the history of his life came to be put in print. The two men were life-long friends, and Claiborne's book owes not a little of its interest to the information so plentifully supplied him by Gwin about the contemporaries of the two men. It is only fair to add that Gwin made an elaborate defense of the validity of his claim. Into the facts and the law set forth therein it has not been deemed necessary to go. Moreover, a minority report of the select committee referred to above, upheld his

⁹⁸ *Congressional globe*, 28 congress, 2 session, 394.

⁹⁹ *Diary of James K. Polk during his presidency, 1845 to 1849* (Quaife ed.), 2: 126, 127, 129.

claim, and declared there was "abundant evidence . . . proving the existence and contents of the contract between the Chickasaw nation and Dr. Gwin." At the instance of Secretary Ewing the attorney-general, Reverdy Johnson, twice pronounced the claim valid.¹⁰⁰

In 1850 Thompson was acting as attorney for the Chickasaw nation; and as he made no objection to the report of the committee exonerating Gwin, the latter considered Thompson to have thereby verified his claim;¹⁰¹ he also dwelt upon the fact that he and Thompson were the best of friends when the latter was a member of Buchanan's cabinet. As a matter of fact Gwin's chief grievance against Thompson seems to have been due to the fact that the latter had procured the defeat of a bill removing from the state courts to the federal jurisdiction at Washington claims involving the Chickasaw nation.¹⁰² Thompson had also incurred the enmity of those concerned in the Choctaw claims, in which the speaker of the house was said to be interested. But it is unnecessary to pursue the subject any further. Though no political consequences ensued by reason of Thompson's failure to succeed Walker in the senate, the incident of the lost commission is strikingly characteristic of Mississippi politics at this period, when business integrity and political morality seem to have suffered severely from the riot of extravagance and speculation that marked the years preceding the era of repudiation.

It only remains to notice briefly a few things of interest in the subsequent careers of the principals in the lost commission. Both Thompson and Brown became conspicuous leaders in the struggle for "southern rights," and staunch supporters of southern interests in the decade following the compromise of 1850. Gwin later represented California in the senate and, as an advocate of vast railroad schemes, he was instrumental in securing millions in the way of appropriations for the west and the Pacific coast. Walker's later career is a story of waning influence in his own party, while failing to gain completely the influence of the antislavery men. According to Gwin, he was

¹⁰⁰ *Congressional globe*, 31 congress, 1 session, appendix, 22: pt. 2, 1224-1234.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 31 congress, 1 session, appendix, 22: pt. 2, 1229.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 28 congress, 2 session, 245.

strongly pressed for secretary of state in Buchanan's administration, a majority of democratic senators signing an application in his favor, but "old Buck" was induced to select General Cass. As compensation, however, Walker was persuaded by Buchanan to accept the governorship of Kansas on the ground that a man of his eminent talents and antecedents would be able to settle the Kansas question in a way that would inevitably make him president in 1860. Gwin begged him not to be deluded by any such anticipations, that the place was below his position in the party, and his acceptance would mortify his best friends. "His good wife joined me in this appeal but all to no effect. He was thoroughly imbued with the belief that he could settle the question successfully, and would be elected President upon his success and would win by acclamation. He came back Buchanan's bitter enemy and with the determination to make fierce war upon him personally." Knowing that he wanted to be dissuaded from such a course, by degrees Gwin got him to meet the president, "when they hugged and kissed and made up."¹⁰³ This incident suggests a similar scene of reconciliation enacted nearly a quarter of a century before in the Parker hotel at Natchez when Walker was as yet unknown to political fame, and when he has been represented as being in "terrible agony" at the thought of his political prospects being blighted on account of his having flinched on the question of the removal of the deposits. On this occasion he is said to have acted like a child saying that General Jackson would never forgive him. Judge Adams and Gwin reassured him, and, as is well known, obtained from Donelson the letter in which the Old Hero bestowed the needed vindication upon the man who was destined to play such a prominent role in the history of his state and country.

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¹⁰³ Claiborne correspondence. For a somewhat different version of the affair, see James F. Rhodes, *History of the United States from the compromise of 1850* (New York, 1895), 2: 272.